

Moment in time

Woodstock man survived Pearl Harbor, Japanese kamikaze attack during WWII

By AMY R. MACK
The Northwest Herald

The ship was listing like this," Wilbur Kiefer said, tilting his hands about a foot apart, one right above the other.

"I went up the deck ... and then walked down the other side into the sea."

His watch — the one his mother gave him when he graduated from Woodstock High School — stopped when Kiefer hit the water-turned-inferno.

It was 8:12 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941.

The ship was the USS Oklahoma, and Kiefer was one of 1,353 sailors scrambling for safety after their ship took at least five torpedo hits early in the morning attack.

Within 20 minutes, the ship rolled belly-up, 400 men still trapped inside. It took two days to reach the 32 who survived.

"That ... that must have been terrible," Kiefer said, shaking his head. He glanced out the window at the high school across the street from the home where he and his wife, Jean, raised four sons. "All those young men ... it was horrible."

Flaming fuel and oil filled the roiling sea. Torpedoes slammed into nearby battleships, gutting the American fleet. Japanese fighters strafed the harbor as Kiefer and hundreds of American sailors desperately swam for safety.

Kiefer said he enlisted in the Navy in February 1939 because he needed a job.

By the time he returned home nearly six years later, he was a decorated war hero who had survived Pearl Harbor and a direct hit by a kamikaze, earning the Purple Heart.



Chris Birks / The Northwest Herald
Wilbur Kiefer of Woodstock served in the Navy from 1939 to 1945 and was stationed on the USS Oklahoma during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He is reluctant to give himself credit.

"We had a job to do and we did it," he said.

A chief gunner's mate, Kiefer was on duty when the first torpedoes rocked the ship. The Oklahoma quickly began to list. As Kiefer and Ralph Postelwaite of Sandusky, Ohio, emerged from gun Turret 2, the gangway broke loose.

It crashed into Postelwaite, knocking him overboard as his shipmate scrambled for cover. It would be 40 years before Kiefer learned that Postelwaite had survived.

Sailors fled the ship. Kiefer swam through the oily waters as smoke

engulfed the harbor and waves of Japanese fighters strafed the sea.

"It was horrible," Kiefer said quietly. "But you do things the way they're supposed to be done."

He reached Ford Island and hooked up with other surviving shipmates hoping to help tend to the wounded. Soon they were stationed at the munitions depot, loading ammo for a return salvo against the Japanese.

When the U.S. forces regrouped after Pearl Harbor, Kiefer found himself aboard the USS Louisville for the remainder of the war.

Aboard the light cruiser Louisville, Kiefer again was in Turret 2 as chief gunner's mate. There were 15 men living in the gun turret, which housed 8-inch guns.

"We slept in the turret on folding cots, had a coffee pot, a record player, played cards. That was our life," Kiefer said.

It was almost the end of it, as well.

The Louisville was part of the Pacific fleet struggling to break through the Philippines en route to the Japanese mainland in early 1945.



A watch given to Kiefer for high school graduation was on his wrist as he swam from the USS Oklahoma after it was attacked.

Chris Birks /
The Northwest
Herald

Fresh from victory in the Surigao Straits, they headed for the Lingayen Gulf. Kiefer had just finished dinner and was making his way back to Turret 2. It was almost dusk, about 5 p.m., Jan. 5, 1945.

Even below decks, Kiefer could hear the noise.

"I came out, and all these planes were coming over the water attacking us," he said. A wall of hundreds of Japanese kamikaze pilots closed in. "Our anti-aircraft let go. I jumped into the turret. The noise was so loud I closed the turret down behind me."

As he did, the suicide fighter hit the gun turret below the bridge, instantly engulfing it — and Kiefer — in flames.

"There's a lot of live powder in there," Kiefer said. "When powder catches on fire, it doesn't explode, it burns. How fast depends on the intensity. It was like a torch going off."

The ball of fire scorched Kiefer's upper body, burning off much of his hair and his eyebrows. Dozens of men died.

Moments later, a second dive bomber slammed into the Louisville's superstructure. The ship's deck turned into a raging furnace.

Kiefer learned of the surprise attack when a loudspeaker called the men to general quarters.

The announcers' use of obscenities convinced the sailors it was no drill.

"I thought they were pulling some practice that could have waited until Monday. But that was the real thing," Kiefer said.

Kiefer raced to his battle station, a 14-inch gun turret five decks above his quarters. He never made it. While he was running up the stairs to man the turret, the USS Oklahoma was hit.

"We took six or seven torpedo hits, and we started rolling over. By the time I got out, the ship was listing so much, I pulled myself up the deck. I got up to the point and walked down the side of the ship," Kiefer said.

Kiefer jumped into the harbor, parts of which were on fire from the pools of oil from damaged ships. He swam to nearby Ford Island and spent the next 2½ weeks loading ammunition for the surviving ships.

Woodstock VFW hosts Pearl Harbor ceremony

By KEVIN P. CRAVER

The Northwest Herald

WOODSTOCK — It was a Sunday; a day to relax, a day of light duty for men in the military.

Woodstock native Wilbur Kiefer slept soundly on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, in the belly of the USS Oklahoma. Kiefer, a gunner's mate third class, looked forward to a day of rest, all too hard to come by in the service.

Sleep may not have come for Kiefer if he had known that the Imperial Japanese Navy was steaming toward Pearl Harbor. They were coming to smash the U.S. Pacific Fleet in a surprise attack.

About 25 people gathered Thursday in the Square to remember Woodstock natives Joe Nelles, Tom Lounsbury and the other Americans who died as the nation entered World War II.

A rifle salute from Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5040 and American Legion Post 171 echoed through the Square at the conclusion of the brief ceremony.

"We must give meaning to the sacrifices of the dead by our own actions today," VFW post Commander Alan Belcher said. He underscored the need to remember the anniversary of an unprovoked attack that shocked a nation.

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Veterans of Foreign Wars
Post 5040 commander

ing ships.

More than 2,000 soldiers, sailors and Marines were killed during the attack.

While 80 year-old Kiefer could not attend the 10 a.m. ceremony because of health reasons, he remembered the sacrifices. Lounsbury was a friend of his.

Lounsbury was stationed on the USS Arizona after graduating from Woodstock High School in 1940. He came to the USS Oklahoma to have Thanksgiving dinner with Kiefer. That was the last time they saw each other.

Another Woodstock resident, Lester Bigelow, also fought at Pearl Harbor and during the war. He died in 1995.

Although the weather kept some people away from the Square, Belcher feared that fewer people are attending because the generation who fought the war is getting smaller each year.

"There are fewer and fewer people who remember Pearl Harbor, but it's important, even though there aren't as many people alive. It's important to remember — it's crucial," Belcher said after the ceremony. "We were unprepared. It cost us."